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## Social Solidarity

**Abstract:** This article explores the concept of social solidarity by elaborating on five propositions about mutually-supportive social relationships. These five propositions are that social solidarity was a key issue for the founding figures of the discipline of sociology in the nineteenth century; that this sociological interest in social solidarity has continued down to the present day; that in the development of sociological analyses of social solidarity there has also been fruitful engagement with neighbouring disciplines; that social solidarity can sometimes be associated with social problems as well as with desirable social outcomes; and, that the nature and causes of social solidarity are matters of important on-going debate.

**Proposition 1:** Social solidarity was a key issue for the founding figures of the discipline of sociology in the nineteenth century. Discussion of social solidarity was prominent in the writings of the founding figures of sociology, who were all in different ways concerned with the bases on which people participate in mutually-supportive social relationships. This is most obvious in the writings of Emile Durkheim, whose book *The Division of Labour in Society* (Durkheim 1984), first published in 1893, was structured around the distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity. This distinction was central to Durkheim's argument that all societies need some mechanism to hold their members together, and that this mechanism changes over time. Durkheim was not the first person to identify what came to be known as 'the problem of order' (Parsons 1968), that is, the problem of explaining the basis on which individuals come together as members of societies in a more or less orderly and regular fashion. What his solution to this problem offered was a radical departure from what had gone before. Durkheim accepted that in some societies the regularity of social life could be explained by the actions of a strong state enforcing repressive legal arrangements, but he argued that such a system could not function effectively in modern societies in which a specialised division of labour and a corresponding degree of differentiation among individuals had developed. Paradoxically, social solidarity in modern societies needs to accommodate to this development of individual differences.

In addition to advancing his critique of the pre-sociological solution to the problem of order framed in terms of a strong state that had been advanced by Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century in *Leviathan* (Hobbes 1968), Durkheim was also keen to dispute the arguments of two fellow pioneers of nineteenth-century sociology, Herbert Spencer and Ferdinand Tönnies. Durkheim deemed Spencer's work inadequate because it placed too much emphasis on people calculating and pursuing their individual self-interest. In Durkheim's view, self-interest can provide only a very limited and unstable basis for the development of common bonds with others, because it would be foolhardy to place trust in the co-operation of others whose sole motive was what they stood to gain personally from the arrangement. Instead, Durkheim insisted that there needed to be a moral framework within which social and economic relationships take place, and the underpinning morality of this arrangement is in a modern society one of respect for other people, what he called 'the cult of the person and individual dignity' (1984: 333), which is sometimes translated as 'the cult of the individual'. Despite the fact that modern societies are characterised by increasing individual differences, they can achieve orderliness because social relationships take

place in a moral framework of mutual respect, which places limits on the extent to which members of that society pursue narrowly self-interested agendas.

This position also led Durkheim to critique the writings of Tönnies, who saw modern societies as increasingly conflictual as old bases of collective identification (such as ties to kinship groups and local traditions) were eroded by social and geographical mobility. Tönnies framed his arguments in terms of past social arrangements being more organic in contrast to modern ones which he considered merely mechanical. Durkheim's analysis made use of these terms but characterised the situation as the other way round (Kivisto 1998: 95), and it is this characterisation that has stuck. National differences in traditions of theorising are evident here. Durkheim epitomised the French tradition in which social solidarity is analysed at the level of whole societies, whereas Tönnies and other German writers focused attention at lower levels of abstraction and were as much concerned with conflict as they were with solidarity. Karl Marx, for example, was primarily concerned with the phenomenon of social solidarity as it was expressed among members of competing social classes, while Max Weber highlighted the ways in which social solidarity was frequently linked to social identities among specific parts of social classes, such as skilled workers, or along ethnic or religious lines. Another German, Georg Simmel, directed attention to even more micro levels of analysis, citing small secret societies as an example of social organizations in which solidarity is most intense. Although these classical sociologists approached solidarity from very different starting points, recent reassessments have shown that important elements in them are complementary (Lockwood 1992; Crow 2002).

Proposition 2: Sociological interest in social solidarity has continued down to the present day. The issue of solidarity to which the classical sociologists devoted much attention continues to confront modern sociologists. Alain Touraine, for example, has asked *Can We Live Together?* (Touraine 2000). This age-old question needs to be posed afresh in contemporary circumstances because the way in which the answers of the classical sociologists were framed may no longer convince as social relationships have evolved. Touraine is particularly interested in the development of other bases of social movements besides those representing social classes. The green movement and the feminist movement, for example, draw their respective support from more than one social class, and the solidarity to be found among such movements cannot readily be accounted for in terms of members' shared class interests. Touraine also researched the Solidarity movement in Poland (Touraine *et al.* 1983), which in the 1980's brought together citizens from across Polish society. It was an organization that by 1989 had played a leading role in bringing about the demise of the Communist system in that country (De Nevers, 2003: ch.3), although its unity proved impossible to sustain as it moved from being an opposition movement to a party of government.

Another contemporary theorist of social solidarity is Ulrich Beck, whose writings on the theme of individualization have been remarkably influential. Beck's argument is that the development of modern societies, and in particular the development of welfare states, has changed the nature of risks to which citizens are subject (Beck 1992). The greater levels of material security enjoyed by modern citizens compared to those that prevailed in earlier historical periods have freed individuals from ties to family and local community, that is, from a situation characterised by 'the obligation of solidarity' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 88). Beck's analysis thus fits into the

tradition of writing that portrays the decline of traditional social solidarity as a corollary of modernisation, and although he has speculated on the potential for new forms of solidarity to emerge, for example around the idea of cosmopolitanism (Beck 1999: 15), his overall theme is that fixed bases on which solidarity can be built are increasingly scarce. This reflects the unsettling influence of global forces on key aspects of life such as work, and also the enhancement of individual reflexivity in the contemporary period as people become more aware of the failure of modernity to deliver on many of its most ambitious promises.

Beck's position should not be confused with that of communitarianism, from which he is keen to distance himself because of what he regards as its backward-looking politics. For Beck, the aspiration to revive past community structures is a project that is bound to fail because the social world has moved on. There is a parallel here to Durkheim's critique of those writers such as Tönnies who sought to preserve traditional social arrangements that modern developments had eroded.

Communitarian ideas have been influential in a number of variants, but particularly noteworthy is the theme of the fall and prospective rise of community in the work of Robert Putnam. Putnam's book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* traces the decline of social solidarity in the United States from a high point in the mid-twentieth century, and analyses this shift in terms of social capital which, he argues, can take two forms, 'bonding' and 'bridging' (Putnam 2000: 22-3). Social capital is strongest where trust between members of communities is most well-established, and the challenge of promoting levels of trust in communities is one of the most urgent facing contemporary societies. Critics have rightly questioned whether findings relating to the USA provide an adequate basis for broader generalization, but Putnam argues that comparative analysis of major advanced societies shows that common trends can be identified. Long-term decline in membership of and involvement in formal organizations such as political parties, trade unions and churches is widely recognised, but running counter to this is a pattern of 'increases in the relative importance of informal, fluid, personal forms of social connection, what Rothstein calls "solidaristic individualism"' (Putnam 2002: 411). Such patterns are less easily measured than more objective facts such as rates of trade union membership, as Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl imply in their reference to friendship networks as 'hidden solidarities' (Spencer and Pahl 2006), but they are where attention in contemporary research is increasingly focused.

Proposition 3: In the development of sociological analyses of social solidarity there has also been fruitful engagement with neighbouring disciplines. Durkheim's ambition to establish a distinctively sociological analysis required him to develop critiques of ideas drawn from economic, political, philosophical and psychological traditions. Nevertheless, the way in which his thought evolved took him increasingly in an anthropological direction as he became more aware of the importance of religion as an influence on social solidarity, and more receptive to the symbolic significance of gifts in the reinforcement of identification with collectivities. Among modern writers this integration of sociological and anthropological perspectives can be found particularly prominently in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, for example in his analysis of the 'absolute solidarity' (1999: 62) to be detected among members of immigrant communities whose shared experiences of discrimination and disadvantage promote the language not of 'I' but of 'We'. Anthropological thinking also directs attention to

the way in which social groups are often represented as 'natural' and likened to biological entities.

A rather different perspective has originated from women's studies, where writers have sought to question how certain solidarities come to be imposed, and how certain groups of people come to be spoken for by others. The question 'Who is this "we"?' (Godway and Finn 1994) highlights the way in which women frequently find themselves committed to various roles, for example as members of communities in which they are expected to perform caring duties. Social solidarity can thus include relationships characterised by obligations or bonds (Blokland 2003), ties of interdependence from which it is very hard to escape. These relationships are typically informal, and provide a form of social lubrication through the pattern of give and take of support, both material and emotional. It is evident that such relationships have not been completely displaced by the development of welfare states, which tend to practise solidarity on the more formalised basis of entitlements to support requiring contributions to social insurance schemes. Feminist scholars have been among those to explore the logic of formal welfare state arrangements and the uneasy relationship between these arrangements and patterns of informal 'family solidarity' (Knijn and Komter 2004). These arguments are linked to the feminist case for more radical conceptions of citizenship rooted in 'a politics of solidarity in difference' (Lister 1997: 80), and which do not assign women to supposedly 'natural' feminine roles.

There has also been much learned about social solidarity in the writings of historians of the welfare state. Peter Baldwin's account of *The Politics of Social Solidarity* highlights the importance of social class configurations in the explanation of how some welfare states came to embody more generous provision than others. His argument is that 'Solidarity is the child of interdependence, although not of interdependence alone' (Baldwin 1990: 33). Parallel to this account is that provided by Abram de Swaan which charts the 'informal togetherness' of the mutual aid societies that emerged as another way for populations to share risks. This analysis incorporates ideas drawn from the study of 'the dilemmas of collective action which may only be solved by mutual trust or compulsion' (1988: 145, 8). Legal and social policy scholars have also contributed to the understanding of social solidarity as it is expressed in the arrangements of welfare states and the rights and obligations of citizens. Maurizio Fererra's analysis shows how 'Solidarity is a rather elusive concept and a complex social good' (2005: 19) which continues to present a challenge to policy-makers in the European Union as they attempt to move beyond the legacy of the different national arrangements that have grown up in the various member states. Alongside this, Putnam's work discussed above exemplifies the useful point of connection between sociology and political science.

Another influence on sociological thinking about social solidarity has come from economics, and in particular game theory. It is widely recognised that solidarity is necessary if collective interests are to be secured, for example in the context of a strike. Jon Elster's observation that 'By acting together the members of a class can obtain more than they could by acting in isolation' (1985: 347) comes in the context of his discussion of Marx's theory of social classes, but the analytical value of approaching individual and collective behaviour in these terms has diverse applications. Elster himself has argued this in his analysis of the transition to post-communist arrangements in Eastern Europe, where 'the societal conflicts that

typically occur within post-communist societies are of a nature *other than class conflicts*' (Elster et al 1998: 247, emphasis in original). Elster's collaborator, Claus Offe, elsewhere speaks of the 'extreme "unbrotherliness" of market relationships' and their "'desolidarizing" effect' (1996: 137), noting the tensions inherent in the actions of governments in post-communist societies as they sought to promote an ethos of solidarity among citizens while simultaneously fostering a transition to more market-based economic relations. The interests that a person has as a member of a collectivity require the exercise of some restraint on the interests that they pursue as an individual. John Goldthorpe (2000) has argued that there is a long history of sociological analysis of rational action, and that ideas in this tradition that engage with developments in economic thinking merit serious consideration. The sociology-economics interface also features in Nan Lin's (2001) analysis of social capital which explores homophilous and heterophilous interactions in social networks characterised by similarity or difference as alternative sources of solidarity.

Proposition 4: Social solidarity can sometimes be associated with social problems as well as with desirable social outcomes. Like the associated term 'community', social solidarity is typically treated as desirable, and its absence regarded as something problematic. Nevertheless, there are aspects of social solidarity that are not necessarily desirable. One of these is its association with social exclusion. Social solidarity is a characteristic of groups whose members share a consciousness of having something in common. This may be membership of a formal organization, or a less formal shared identification with a particular locality, or a nation state, but in all cases membership implies a distinction between members and others, that is, between insiders and outsiders. This is not necessarily a problem, but where the exclusion of outsiders extends to restrict opportunities for them to join the group, and extends further to the stigmatisation of outsiders, the social solidarity of a group can be associated with discrimination. This point has been made about the more extreme forms of what Putnam calls 'bonding' social capital, such as the strongly-held in-group consciousness and hostility to others found in divided societies, but the notion of the superiority of the groups to which one belongs is present more widely. Martin Albrow has developed this point by arguing that 'the ideal of solidarity is.... in an important sense anti-social' (1999: 25). Nationalism provides a good example of the potential of solidarity to promote co-operation within groups but conflict between them, but the point applies to all forms of identity politics.

A second way in which social solidarity can be associated with social problems is where it takes the form of coercion on members to behave in ways that they would not have freely chosen. Craig Calhoun's discussion of the 'common bonds' of community as loaded with the expectations of other community members gives the relationships of social solidarity the force of 'moral obligations' (1983: 92). Such tensions come to the fore during times of conflict when, for example, the solidarity of trade union members is tested during a strike. Jack Metzgar's study of the US steel strike of 1959 includes the comment that 'disciplined unity was the source of union power' (2000: 163), because here as in other such conflicts the success of the strategy requires that members put the good of the group ahead of individual self-interest, and that people's behaviour is monitored to ensure compliance. Pressure to conform to community expectations can also be found in more routine aspects of social life, however, as feminist researchers have argued in relation to expectations on women to carry out caring responsibilities as an expression of kinship solidarity. Such relationships can be

experienced as 'too close for comfort' (Mason 1999: 156). Another example of solidarity being problematic in this respect is where opportunities for members to leave a group are restricted, such as when young people are discouraged from pursuing educational or career opportunities by this course of action being portrayed as a form of disloyalty to the group to whom they have certain obligations.

In the extreme, mental illness can be an outcome of social solidarity where it is experienced as psychological pressure by group members. This argument has been made by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, whose study of rural Ireland found 'a strong sense of community solidarity' operating 'at the expense of the individual' (2001: 314-5), or at least at the expense of those individual members of the community who were psychologically vulnerable. Social solidarity is associated with supportive arrangements for members of a group, but only rarely are these arrangements on terms of their own choosing. It is a prominent theme of numerous studies that social solidarity should not be romanticised. The tendency to emphasise the idealised, positive dimensions of 'friendliness, togetherness, closeness' (Dicks 2000: 239) directs attention away from the more negative aspects of pressures on individuals to conform to approved modes of behaviour, and to prioritise the interests of the group over other concerns that an individual may have. Furthermore, individuals can find themselves pulled in different directions by the demands of different collectivities to which they belong. A typical person belongs to a number of different groups, and there are bound to be occasions when an individual has to prioritise. The notion that family and kinship responsibilities deserve priority over other commitments is a deeply-entrenched one, expressed in the idea that 'families come first', but other groups such as circles of friends or religious, political or community organizations compete for an individual's time and resources, and also deploy the language of solidarity to make demands on members. Solidarity is also emphasised as an underlying principle of state welfare arrangements, even though the give and take involved between members of welfare states is a relationship between strangers (Lees 1998). There is continuing interest in the connection between the evolving arrangements relating to welfare state membership and the more informal patterns of solidarity between people known personally to each other.

Proposition 5: The nature and causes of social solidarity are matters of important on-going debate. The concerns of the early sociologists to explore the foundations of social order and the potential for re-ordering social relationships remain influential in setting the sociological agenda. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are powerful voices expressing concern about the supposed decline of social solidarity, and sociologists have a role to play in contributing to debates about the emergence of new forms of social solidarity, and related debates about how far these can be fostered. Just as Durkheim saw it as important for his sociological analysis to offer solutions to the problems that his analysis had identified, contemporary sociologists are involved in discussions about viable forms of social organization. Durkheim's own solutions advocated the development of occupational associations, which changes in the worlds of both work and welfare provision have transcended, but his identification of the broad sphere of civil society as vital to the integration of individuals into wider collectivities continues to frame the debate. Putnam's (2000) examination of the prospects of the revival of community fits this perspective, for example, as does the wider literature on what is variously discussed as civil society, the third sector, non-

governmental organizations, or (most vague of all) the sphere of informal social relationships.

These debates are about much more than terminology. First of all they also concern what motivates people to co-operate with others in solidaristic social relationships. It was noted above that one approach derived from game theory and founded on the assumption of rational action seeks to analyse collective behaviour in terms of people's calculations of what is in their interests. The social insurance schemes designed to protect individuals and their families against unemployment, health and other risks that are at the heart of welfare states can be understood as a collective arrangement in which it is rational for individuals to participate. Without such collective schemes, the costs of prolonged periods of unemployment or ill-health would be prohibitive for most people and so it makes sense for these costs to be shared because even though many individuals will contribute more money than they receive from the scheme, no one knows in advance who will come to need unemployment or health assistance. From this point of view, it is rational to enter into solidary relationships. Michael Hechter's (1987) analysis emphasises the way in which social solidarity makes sense to participants as something which benefits them. A very different approach is offered by writers who associate solidarity with altruistic motives, that is, something entered into by people who are in a distinct mindset from the calculation of individual interest. According to Mary Douglas, 'solidarity is only gesturing when it involves no sacrifice' (1987: 4), and from this point of view people participate in solidaristic behaviour because it is the right thing to do. This line of analysis emphasises the importance of morality and duty rather than self-interest. It also highlights the importance of rituals in reminding people of their membership of the group and their obligations to their fellow members to obey group norms.

A second matter of on-going debate is the very nature of social solidarity itself. The double-sided character of social solidarity, whereby what Norbert Elias has called 'chains of interdependencies' (1974: xix) are both empowering and constraining, is neatly captured by the way in which it is described both as a form of social 'glue' and as a social 'lubricant'. Put another way, social solidarity binds people together but it also puts people in touch with others who can be trusted despite not being like them in every respect. In Putnam's (2000) terms, it can be either 'bonding' or 'bridging'. It is not surprising that these two elements are in tension with each other, because glue and lubricants serve very different purposes. Which of these two aspects comes to the fore depends very much on context. In some situations, appeals to solidarity bind people together by reminding them of what characteristics they have in common. Examples of this can be found in diverse social phenomena ranging from the macro to the micro levels; they may be whole societies whose members are united by nationalistic sentiments, or they may be individual families comprising perhaps as few as two or three people. In other contexts, the lubricating quality of social solidarity is more in evidence, where reference to a shared objective or point of connection reminds people of what they have in common despite their very real differences in terms of social class, gender, age, ethnicity or other features. Social movements made up of heterogeneous elements have to highlight their common goal and the strength that is brought by these diverse elements coming together, and being able to achieve more than they could as separate entities. Poland's Solidarity movement provides a powerful example of different elements being brought together by a common purpose, although it also illustrates that a movement primarily held together by a common



enemy (in this case Poland's communist system) is likely to fall apart once that common enemy disappears. The general point is that it is helpful to analyse solidarity and schism together (Lockwood 1992).

The temporal aspects of social solidarity also merit attention. Solidarity is an unstable phenomenon that oscillates between periods of relative quiescence and of intense expression during events such as strikes, revolutions, and religious ceremonies. Durkheim's term 'collective effervescence' (1976: xvi) captures solidarity's mercurial quality by describing periodic bursts of intense feelings of shared purpose that bring people together. The other side of this is the difficulty of maintaining consistently high levels of commitment to the common good as a matter of routine. Solidarity is generally understood as a matter of long-term commitment, because as Durkheim recognised it provides a basis for durable social relationships that survive fluctuations in people's circumstances, during which they will be sometimes net recipients of support, and sometimes net contributors of support to others. Solidarity requires commitment to stay with these relationships in both situations. Finally it is instructive methodologically that surveys find people more ready to identify their contributions to the support of others than they are to acknowledge their receipt of support from others (Widegren 1997), even though in principle there ought to be a balance between contributors and beneficiaries. For all of these reasons, studying solidarity remains interesting.

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